

The Emotional Impact of E-Mail on Deployment As Experienced by Submariners and Their Families Stationed at the Naval Submarine Base New London

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Executive Summary

The deployment experience within the submarine lifestyle creates a broad range of emotional responses in both the active duty member and his spouse. The recent implementation of e-mail as a communication tool used between sailors and their families during deployment has introduced a new variable to the dynamics of separation and maintaining an emotional relationship with loved ones during separation. A survey was conducted to examine the impact of e-mail on morale, emotional connectedness during separation, reunion, expectations, the ability to focus during deployment and the existing emotional cycle.

A combination of closed and open ended responses were collected from written surveys distributed to crew members and spouses from three fast attack submarines homeported at the Naval Submarine Base New London in Groton, Connecticut. Each submarine had returned from deployment (a separation of three months or longer) less than 120 days prior to receiving the survey. The typical respondent for this survey was a 28-year-old married male with one or more children and with an annual family income of \$40,000 or less. He has completed some college coursework and has experienced at least three deployments lasting a minimum of ninety days each.

Survey results indicate that e-mail boosts morale, increases emotional connectedness and facilitates a positive reunion experience. However, respondents note that expectations about e-mail were not met. In addition, respondents indicated that the emotional cycle of deployment may be shifting to include more positive emotions such as *confidence* and *self-assuredness*. A comparison between emotional responses during deployment that became the basis for the existing emotional cycle of deployment and current emotional

responses during three phases of the deployment cycle indicate greater self-assuredness and confidence during the beginning and end phases of the cycle. While historically these two phases of deployment have been emotionally difficult for most, increased feelings of confidence and self-assuredness during these periods indicate a shift from the traditional cycle. While this study cannot directly attribute the shift to e-mail use or to other factors inherent to the sample population, the shift invites further discussion and analysis of current education and training programs that may need to be modified.

The ability of sailors to focus or concentrate during deployment is essential and driven by the nature of the work and the risks inherent in operating the required equipment and ensuring the safety of fellow crewmembers. In this study, male respondents report only mild disruption in concentration as a result of e-mail use. Spouses report much higher levels of disruption. Those with less deployment (lifestyle) experience indicated even higher disruption.

Lastly, communication tools utilized by the Navy to educate sailors and spouses about e-mail use have been effectively implemented. Interestingly, despite the variety and frequency of messages about e-mail use during deployment, expectations are still not met. Commands must better educate both sailors and spouses about current e-mail technology, processes, potential pitfalls and differences between civilian and on board e-mail systems to enable formation of realistic expectations. In addition, implementation of technology to enhance e-mail reliability and efficiency may be warranted.

Separation from loved ones is difficult under any circumstances. Deployment for several months with limited, sporadic communication can be challenging for even the most adaptable and self-sufficient families. E-mail has introduced a new dynamic to the quality of life enjoyed by sailors and their families. While not a perfect system, the increased communication opportunities provided by e-mail have contributed to increased satisfaction, greater spousal confidence during separation and enhanced overall quality of life – important assets to mission readiness.

(The research and opinions expressed by the author are her own and not an official expression by the Department of the Navy)